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Report of the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators 2022-23

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Under Article III (2) of the Antarctic Treaty

Introduction

The International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (IAATO) is pleased to report its activities to ATCM XLV.

IAATO focuses activities in support of its mission to advocate and promote the practice of safe and environmentally responsible private sector travel to Antarctica. Further information on IAATO, its mission, primary activities and recent developments can be found at: www.iaato.org.

Overview

Over the last three decades, IAATO has been committed to the promotion of safe and environmentally responsible private sector travel. This commitment has been unwavering through periods of major growth and, recently, the SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) pandemic.

IAATO's membership totals 109 Members, comprised of 57 Operators and Provisional Operators and 52 Associates. IAATO's strength has been and continues to be its membership's ability to draw upon their own experience and the advice from other stakeholders to address emerging challenges and evolve its procedures and management when necessary.

After experiencing minimal activity in the 2020-21 season, the 2021-22 season saw a moderate resumption of operations though COVID-19 challenges persisted. This modest restart did allow Operators to deploy some new vessels; however, most Operators did not run at full capacity. For the 2022-23 season however, Operators did see a significant recovery in operations, though the passenger numbers were not as high as initial estimates.

Through feedback from the Operators throughout the season, as well as the National Competent Authorities and results from IAATO's Mandatory Observer Scheme (ATCM XLII - IP138), new measures were agreed to at IAATO's 2023 Annual Meeting in Hamburg, Germany (24-27 April 2023). Additionally, a five-year strategic plan was approved. These steps are important to fulfill IAATO's mission, and to ensure Operators' activities have no more than a minor or transitory environmental impact.

Further information on IAATO Operators' activities can be found in ATCM XLV IP056 *IAATO Vessel Overview of Antarctic Tourism: 2022-23 Season and Preliminary Estimates for 2023-24 Season*.

Internal communication between IAATO and its Operators continued to be strong during the season. Feedback from the Operators, especially around the implementation of special biosecurity protocols to address concerns relating to highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI), was also received. Utilizing communications from Operators, feedback from the National Competent Authorities and trends identified during the 25 observations conducted under IAATO's Observer Program, enhancements to existing operational procedures were presented to IAATO's members at the Annual Meeting and were approved.

The total number of visitors in the 2022-23 season was 104,897 which was less than the preliminary estimates provided at ATCM XLIV. This was mainly the result of lower occupancy on the vessels travelling to Antarctica.

Further information on IAATO tourism statistics, including activities and nationalities, can be found in ATCM XLV IP053 *A Five-Year Overview and 2022–23 Season Report on IAATO Operator Use of Antarctic Peninsula Landing Sites and ATCM Visitor Site Guidelines* and IP057 *Deep Field and Air Overview of Antarctic Tourism: 2022-23 Season and Preliminary Estimates for 2023-24 Season*. The Membership Directory can be found at www.iaato.org.

IAATO Annual Meeting

IAATO's 2023 Annual Meeting was held in Hamburg, Germany, 24-27 April 2023. Certain portions of this meeting were also live streamed for members. After the pause due to the COVID-19 pandemic, IAATO was also pleased to have National Competent Authority representatives attend the open sessions.

Actions at the Annual Meeting included:

- Approval of IAATO's five-year strategy, *Embracing Our Role as Stewards of Antarctica*. This strategy is focused on four goals:
 - Operators as Stewards
 - Purposeful support of research
 - Deliberate resource management plan
 - Persistent proactive measures focused on sustainability

Additionally, seven short term actions for the upcoming year were approved, including members further investing in IAATO and the development of a site reporting program.

- Adoption of Deep Field & Air Operator biosecurity procedures. See ATCM XLV – IP052 *IAATO Deep Field and Air Biosecurity Procedures – An update*.
- Strengthening of various operational procedures for viewing wildlife based upon feedback from the field and a National Competent Authority. See ATCM XLV – IP051 *IAATO Operational Procedures for responsible wildlife watching – An update*.
- Development of two new geofenced areas around the South Shetland Islands and the increased duration of the Gerlache Strait geofenced zone for IAATO's whale slow down program based upon feedback received from the scientific community and IAATO Operators' monitoring during the 2022-23 season.
- Approval of two new IAATO Visitor Site Guidelines - Red Rock Ridge and President Head.
- Approval of the engagement of a third-party vendor to assist in supporting our commitment to our Climate Change pledge (approved at the IAATO 2022 Annual Meeting) and evaluating our carbon footprint.
- Elevation of the Education and Outreach Working Group to a committee – Antarctic Ambassador Committee; and creation of the Scientific Support and Air/Cruise Working Groups. IAATO now has 12 committees and 9 working groups.

As always, Treaty Party Representatives are cordially invited to join any of the open sessions during IAATO's future Annual Meetings.

IAATO Support of Research & Conservation

IAATO encourages collaborative opportunities with scientific organizations particularly where these enhance the Antarctic community's understanding of human activities in the region. Projects include(d):

- Avian Influenza (HPAI) Response – Prior to the start of the 2022-23 season, IAATO collaborated with COMNAP and SCAR to develop biosecurity protocols to address the

concerns related to HPAI. These were communicated to IAATO Operators in August 2022 and materials were developed to assist with the education of field staff and guests related to these protocols. See also ATCM XLV – IP101 *Heightened Risk of Avian Influenza in the Antarctic Treaty Area*.

- IAATO/COMNAP Fellowships – IAATO, in collaboration with COMNAP, will continue to invest in the development of early-career researchers by awarding its fifth US\$15,000 Fellowship in 2023. Suitable candidates are encouraged to [apply](#). IAATO [recognized](#) two fellows in 2022: Eduardo Pizzaro Gonzalez from the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile and, jointly with COMNAP, Antonio Polo Sanchez from Universidad de Salamanca in Spain.
- IAATO/SCAR Systematic Conservation Plan – SCAR and IAATO undertook a collaborative project to develop a systematic conservation plan for the Antarctic Peninsula, aimed at facilitating the concurrent management of biodiversity, science and tourism (ATCM XLII – IP024; ATCM XL - IP166). See also ATCM XLV – IP048 *Systematic Conservation Plan for Antarctic Peninsula Project Updates and Next Steps*.
- Support in Antarctica – IAATO Operator expeditions during the 2022-23 season were able to provide support for various scientific projects, such as the Antarctic Site Inventory - Oceanites and Penguin Watch. Many IAATO Operators also provided logistic field support by air or vessel support to National Antarctic Programs.

Other Work and Activities

IAATO also continues to prioritise activities that strengthen its institutional structure and help position it as a reputable, valued partner in the wider polar community. In addition to the work described above, over the past year, IAATO has:

- Hosted 12 webinars for Field Staff at the beginning and end of the 2022-23 season to discuss best practices and lessons learned. These webinars were recorded and made available for field staff who weren't able to attend the live session or wanted a refresher during the season. They will become part of an education library available for field staff and Operators. This practice will continue for the 2023-24 season.
- Continued development of tools to support field staff when delivering the Antarctic Ambassadors message to clients and further executed on the Antarctic Ambassadors strategy through public engagement in events such as the annual Antarctic Ambassadorship Day.
- Facilitated over 4,000 online assessments for field staff, crew and office personnel which were successfully completed for the 2022-23 season.

In addition, IAATO Secretariat staff and Operator representatives participated in internal and external meetings, liaising with Treaty Party representatives, National Antarctic Program personnel, and governmental, scientific, environmental, and industry organizations, including but not limited to:

- **COMNAP Annual Meeting**, online, June 2022, and participation in **COMNAP Expert Groups**
- **Association of Arctic Expedition Cruise Operators (AECO) Conference & Annual Meeting**, October 2022
- **IMO Polar Maritime Seminar**, November 2022
- **Workshop “The future of Antarctic tourism: towards a strategic vision and policy program”**, 8-10 March 2023, Paris, France

Tourism Incidents 2022-23

IAATO's policy is to disclose major incidents to ensure risks are understood and appropriate lessons are learned for all Antarctic Operators. There were three incidents during the 2022-23 season which resulted in the death of four individuals who were travelling with IAATO Operators. This was felt not only by IAATO and its Operators but also by many of our fellow Antarctic stakeholders and IAATO appreciates their support during this time. These incidents remain under active investigation and final reports will be released in due course. Additionally, there was an incident with a submersible trapped at the surface in brash ice for several hours.

Finally, directed by the Chilean MRCC, an IAATO Operator assisted a fishing vessel in the Amundsen Sea, by providing lifesaving medical assistance and evacuation services for an individual injured during fishing operations.

IAATO is committed to reviewing all incidents, and taking appropriate actions for updating operational procedures as needed.

With Thanks

IAATO appreciates the opportunity to work cooperatively with Antarctic Treaty Parties, COMNAP, SCAR, CCAMLR, IHO/HCA, WMO, ASOC and others toward the long-term protection of Antarctica.